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DEFENSE SNOOPS OFTEN KEEP INFORMATION TO THENSELVES
BY WILLIAM H. INMAN

Allegations that Pentagon intelligence officials suppressed a tip about a major Iranian arms deal in hopes of gaining war data and and access to an advanced Soviet tank come as no surprise to sources familiar with defense intelligence operations.

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''An extremely high priority ... is to get ahold of advanced Soviet weaponry,'' says Jeff Richelson, a respected intelligence analyst at American University in Washington, D.C. ''Not to take a picture of it, or to have it described, but to physically obtain that weapon. Whatever it takes to gain that (weapon) is considered worthwhile.''

Indeed, a major Pentagon effort is called the Foreign Material Exploitation Program. It has evolved over the years to coordinate efforts to collect bits and pieces of hot Soviet weapons.

''Parts of surface-to-air missiles -- sometimes whole airplanes - are subjected to detailed and rigorous analysis,'' Richelson says. ''Many of these items come from a variety of sources. There are few questions asked about sources.''

Pentagon officials learned more than a year ago about a private effort to ship 39 warplanes and other war supplies to Iran but did nothing to put a halt to the scheme by alerting civilian agencies, the New York Times reported recently. The officials, according to the report, hoped by their silence to gain valuable intelligence into the Iran-Iraq conflict and access to advanced Soviet T-72 tanks captured by Iran.

The arms deal -- code-named Demavand -- was considerably larger than, and separate from, the Iranian arms shipments authorized by the White House, according to the Times.

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''There is no doubt some defense intelligence people view their mission from a particular slant,'' says Matthew Gallagher, a former CIA analyst.

Statistical data, for instance, prepared by the CIA about Soviet military capabilities are often at odds with figures formulated by the individual service branches, Gallagher said.

''It appeared there was a tendency for the military agencies to emphasize the Soviet threat because it was more in line with institutional interests. The CIA generally took a softer view on the Soviet capabilities.''

Adds Richelson: ''One reason each service wants its own intelligence capability is so that it can challenge CIA estimates with which it disagrees, and which, not incidentally, might threaten its budget and mission.''

There have been numerous examples of defense intelligence agencies withholding key data from civilian authorities. During Vietnam, vital military intelligence data was routinely withheld from the White House, the State Department and other non-military agencies. Intelligence gaps were blamed for distorting official expectations throughout the war.

The short-sightedness of defense agencies may have contributed to the enormity of the Pearl Harbor disaster. On the eve of the Japanese attack in

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1941, Army and Navy intelligence branches had each gathered material, including sensitive secret communications by the Japanese, indicating an imminent attack on a U.S. naval base somewhere in the Pacific.

The material was forwarded to the White House, but not to the board of analysts established by the White House to judge the importance of all intelligence and to recommend action. The board was headed by William Donovan, founder of the organization that was to become the CIA.

Not only before, but during and after the devastating bomb attack, the board known informally as the ''College of Cardinals'' was deprived of hard intelligence on Japanese war intentions, even though the data was readily available.

In this latest incident, according to the Times, several high-ranking intelligence officials last year heard from a credible source of a huge private network established to ship nearly a billion dollars in American war material from third countries to Iran. The Pentagon has denied it ever received such information.

Intelligence officials named in the Times story declined to return phone calls to UPI.

Some officials believe the informant's tip must have been passed along, although not necessarily to civilian authorities.

''That's the nature of the system,'' says Lt. Gen. Danial Graham, former director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, which monitors activities of all military intelligence. ''I would be surprised and appalled if such important information wasn't widely known quickly (within the Pentagon),'' he says.